

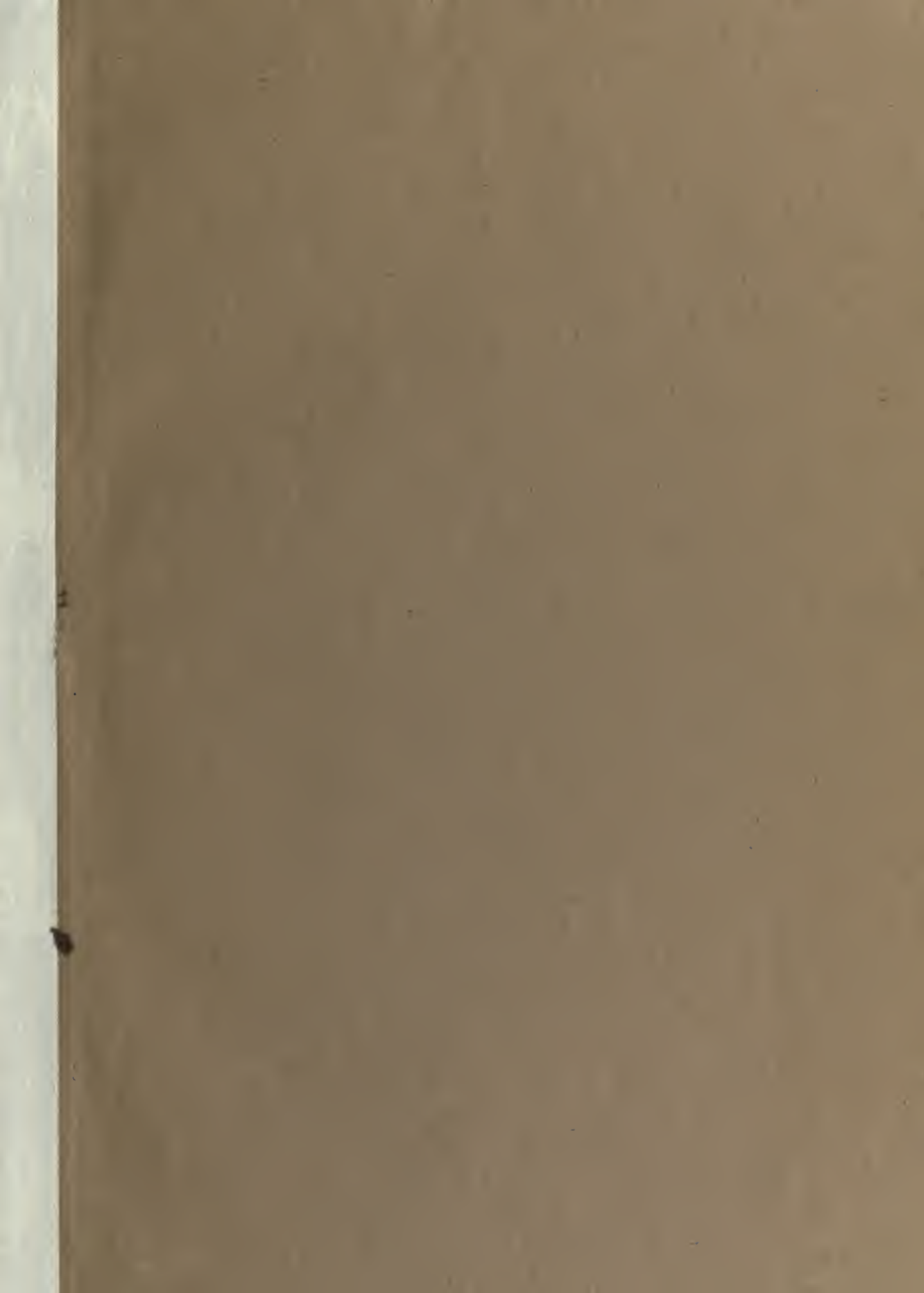
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LITERATURE

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A Personal

Word by

H. L. MENCKEN

GEORGE JEAN NATHAN and I took over the editorial direction of **THE SMART SET** in the Summer of 1914, just after the outbreak of the late war. I had been doing my monthly book article since November, 1908, and Nathan had been doing his article about the theatres since a month or two later. It never occurred to me, in those years, that I should ever assume a larger share of editorial responsibility for the magazine. John Adams Thayer, then the publisher and majority stockholder, had offered me the editorship several times, but I had always refused it for a single and simple reason: I didn't want to live in New York, which seemed to me then and seems to me now a most uncomfortable city. My home was and is in Baltimore, which I like much better.

But in the Summer of 1914 that impediment was suddenly removed. Thayer

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disposed of the magazine to Eltinge F. Warner, publisher of The Warner Publications, and his associates. Some time before this, by one of the trivial accidents of life, Warner had met Nathan on a ship bound home from England; the two happened to be wearing overcoats of the same kind, and stopped to gabble idly, as fellow passengers will, on deck one morning. They had a few drinks together, parted at the dock, and never thought to meet again. But when Warner looked into the magazine that he was to manage, he found the name of Nathan on the list of regular contributors, and, recalling their brief meeting, sought him out and asked him to take the editorship. Nathan said that he would do it if I agreed to help him. There ensued negotiations, and the upshot was an arrangement that is still in force.

Our authority as editors is exactly equal; nevertheless, we are never in conflict. I read all the manuscripts that are sent to us, and send Nathan those that I think are fit to print. If he agrees, they go into type at once; if he dissents, they are rejected forthwith. This veto is absolute, and works both ways. It saves us a great many useless and

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possibly acrimonious discussions. It takes two yeses to get a poem or essay or story into the magazine, but one no is sufficient to keep it out. In practice, we do not disagree sharply more than once in a hundred times, and even then, as I say, the debate is over as soon as it begins. I doubt that this scheme has ever lost us a manuscript genuinely worth printing. It admits prejudices into the matter, but they are at least the prejudices of the responsible editors, and not those of subordinate manuscript readers. We employ no readers, and take no advice. Every piece of manuscript that comes into the office passes through my hands, or those of Nathan, and usually through the hands of both of us. I live in Baltimore, but come to New York every other week.

So much for editorial management. Our financial organization is equally simple. Warner made over some of the capital stock of the magazine to Nathan and me, and we three continue in joint control today. Warner's problem, when we took charge, was to pay off the somewhat heavy floating debt of the property, and put it on a sound basis. This he accomplished before the end of 1915. From the moment he came into the office THE SMART SET

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has paid all authors immediately on the acceptance of their manuscripts, paid all printers' and paper bills promptly—and absorbed not a cent of new capital. Warner operates all of his enterprises in that manner. We trust his judgment in all business matters, as he trusts ours in editorial matters. The usual conflict between the editorial room and the business office is never heard of here.

II.

An impression seems to be abroad that *THE SMART SET*, selling at 35 cents, makes an enormous profit, and that Warner, Nathan and I have got rich running it. This is not true. Warner is a man of many enterprises and has made a great deal of money, and Nathan and I are both able to exist comfortably without looking to the magazine. Had we been inclined, we might have turned it into a very productive money-maker. This is not merely tall-talk; we actually did the thing with three other magazines. But from the start we viewed *THE SMART SET* as, in some sense, a luxury rather than a means of profit, and this view of it has always conditioned our management of it. We have

never made any effort to attract readers in large numbers; we have always sought to print, not the most popular stuff we could find, but the best stuff. And we have never made any effort to load the magazine with advertising: it prints less than any other magazine of its class. This desire to be free—to run the thing to suit ourselves without regard to either popular taste or the prejudices of advertisers—has cost us much revenue, and the fact has not only deprived us of good profits, but also made it impossible for us to compete with the more popular magazines in bidding for manuscripts. But we have never regretted our policy. The authors who expect and demand enormous prices for their wares—the Carusos and Babe Ruths of letters—are but seldom the sort of authors we are interested in. It has been our endeavor, not to startle the booboisie with such gaudy stars, but to maintain a hospitable welcome for the talented newcomer—to give him his first chance in good company, and to pay him, if not the wages of a moving-picture actor, then at least enough to reward him decently for his labor. We believe that this scheme has cost us very few manuscripts worth printing. We

have not only brought out by it more novices of first-rate ability than any other American magazine; we have also had the pleasure of printing some of the best work of contemporary American authors of assured position, including Dreiser, Cabell, Sherwood Anderson and Miss Cather. Such authors, we believe, regard the atmosphere of *THE SMART SET* as different from that of the commercial magazines.

But our purpose, of course, has not been altruistic. We are surely not uplifters, either as critics or as editors. We have run our magazine as we have written our books—primarily to please ourselves, and secondarily to entertain those Americans who happen, in general, to be of our minds. We differ radically in many ways. For example, Nathan is greatly amused by the theatre, even when it is bad, whereas I regard it as a bore, even when it is good. Contrariwise, I am much interested in politics, whereas Nathan scarcely knows who is Vice-President of the United States. But on certain fundamentals we are thoroughly agreed, and it is on the plane of these fundamentals that we conduct *THE SMART SET*, and try to interest a small minority of Americans.

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Both of us are against the sentimental, the obvious, the trite, the maudlin. Both of us are opposed to all such ideas as come from the mob, and are polluted by its stupidity: Puritanism, Prohibition, Comstockery, evangelical Christianity, tin-pot patriotism, the whole sham of democracy. Both of us, though against socialism and in favor of capitalism, believe that capitalism in the United States is ignorant, disreputable and degraded, and that its heroes are bounders. Both of us believe in the dignity of the fine arts, and regard Beethoven and Brahms as far greater men than Wilson and Harding. Both of us stand aloof from the childish nationalism that now afflicts the world, and regard all of its chief spokesmen, in all countries, as scoundrels.

We believe that there are enough other Americans of our general trend of mind to give a reasonable support to a magazine voicing such notions. We believe that such men and women have the tolerance that is never encountered in the nether majority—that they like a certain amount of free experimentation in the arts. We thus try to assemble for them the novelties that seem to us to be genuinely worth while—not the

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tawdry monkey-shines of Greenwich Village, but the new work of the writers who actually know how to write. Thus we printed the plays of Eugene O'Neill when he was still an unknown newcomer, and the strange, sardonic short stories of Ben Hecht before ever he started to write "Erik Dorn," and the sketches of Lord Dunsany before his vogue began. As I say, we do not pursue neologism for its own sake: THE SMART SET avoided all the extravagances of the free verse movement, as it is now avoiding the extravagances of such foreign crazes as Expressionism and Dadaism. We try to entertain the reader who can distinguish between genuine ideas and mere blather. It is for this reason, perhaps, that our poetry, to some readers—and especially to many of the new poets—seems excessively conservative. But here conservatism, we believe, has served a good purpose, for we have certainly printed as much sound poetry, during the past seven or eight years, as any of the magazines devoted to *vers libre*, and a great deal more than most. Practically all the genuine poets of the country have been in the magazine during that time, and most of them have been in it very often.

III.

Needless to say, what we print does not always correspond exactly with what we'd like to print. We buy the best stuff that we can find, and that is within our means—and sometimes the supply of such stuff is distressingly short. There have been months when we felt that only a small portion of the contents of the magazine was really fit to set before the readers we have in mind—when the larger part of those contents, read in manuscript and proof, filled us with depression. In particular, we have often found it difficult to obtain suitable novelettes. The ordinary novelettes of commerce are fearful things, indeed; once or twice, failing to discover anything better, we have had to print one. Invariably there came protests from many readers—a thing that pleased us, despite our distress, for it showed clearly that we were reaching a public that was not content with the average magazine fare. But in the face of this chronic scarcity we have printed many novelettes of quite extraordinary merit, including W. Somerset Maugham's "Miss Thompson," Miss Willa Cather's "Coming, Eden Bower!", Thyra Samter Winslow's "Cycle of Manhattan," and several capital

pieces by other writers. Essays have also given us much concern. Practically all of the essayists who flourish in the United States devote themselves to whimsical fluff in imitation of Charles Lamb—stuff that is poor in ideas and conventional in execution. We have tried hard to find and encourage writers with more to say, but so far without much success. However, even in this bleak field we have unearthed an occasional piece of sound quality—for example, Stephen Ta Van's "Tante Manhattan" and Thomas Beer's "The Rural Soul" and "The Mauve Decade"—and we have hopes of doing much better hereafter. In the field of the short story we believe that we have presented a great deal of genuinely first-rate work. The stories we print are not reprinted in the annual anthologies issued by admirers of the late O. Henry, but in a good many cases the authors of them—for example, Mr. Hecht, Sherwood Anderson and F. Scott Fitzgerald—have later shown their quality by brilliant successes in the larger form of the novel. Our own contributions to the magazine I need not discuss: opinion about them seems to be very sharply divided. But I have reason to believe that they are

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read rather widely, both when they are serious and when they are not serious, and I know that, when reprinted in books, they have sold far better than such books usually sell, and got a great deal more notice, both at home and abroad. Of my own books since 1914, all those save "The American Language" have consisted in large part of matter reworked from articles first printed in *THE SMART SET*. So with all of Nathan's books.

I have mentioned the difficulty of filling the magazine each month with stuff that is wholly up to the mark we try to set; we print what we can get, but we can't print it until it is written. Various other handicaps have beset us, and still beset us. One lies in the fact that we are determined to make the magazine pay its own way—that we are convinced that a subsidized magazine, conducted at a loss, is unsound in principle, and very apt to be led astray by all the current aesthetic crazes, to the dismay of the sort of readers we try to reach. This policy, during the days of the war-time and post-bellum paper famine, reduced us to printing on a paper that was frankly atrocious. It was too thick and rough, it would not take the ink

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cleanly, and its stiffness made the magazine hard to open. Hundreds of readers denounced us for using it, and with justice. We abandoned it as soon as possible, and have since improved the quality of our paper steadily, as the market price has fallen. I am also inclined to think that for a while we neglected our covers, and that many readers found them out of harmony with the general contents of the magazine. If so, the matter has been remedied, and will be further remedied hereafter. But the worst of all our handicaps lies in the name of the magazine. A great many persons, unfamiliar with its contents, assume that it is a society paper, or that it is chiefly devoted to tales of high life. Unluckily, changing the name is not a simple matter. We inherited a bond issue with the property, and by the terms of the mortgage no change may be made without the consent of the bondholders—and inasmuch as they are scattered and view all such radical innovations with distrust, that consent is not easy to obtain. The matter is further complicated by the fact that there is an English Smart Set Company, reprinting most of the contents of the magazine under the same name in England. Our contract

with that company is of such character that a change in the name of the magazine would cause serious difficulties, and perhaps subject us to great loss. So we have to continue THE SMART SET on the flagstaff, though both Nathan and I believe that the name loses us many readers who might otherwise buy the magazine. At some time or other in the future we may solve the problem.

Finally, there is the fact that, in the days before we acquired editorial control, THE SMART SET passed through the hands of many editors, some of them sharply at odds with the others on questions of general policy, and that the resultant aberrations alienated a good many readers. There was a time when the magazine ran to "daring" stuff, often of a highly sexual and sophomoric character. That was before our day, and the experiment was soon abandoned, but there are many old readers, scared off then, who still believe that the magazine is full of *risqué* stories. This, of course, is not true. We do not aim to astonish sucklings; the readers we address are assumed to be of adult growth, and hence capable of bearing occasional plain-speaking without damage. But neither do we devote ourself to provid-

ing diversion for the dirty old men of the vice societies. One more misunderstanding remains. *THE SMART SET* is often spoken of as a fiction magazine, and there are persons who seem to think that it prints nothing else. This was true years ago, but it is certainly not true now. In our average number fully half of the contents is not fiction. Very soon we hope to make that proportion even larger.

IV.

Now for the lesson of the day. Most of our circulation, at the moment, is what is called news-stand circulation. That is to say, it tends to be irregular. A reader buys the magazine for three or four months running at some news-stand he passes now and then, and perhaps likes it enough to look forward to each new number. But soon or late he finds that his dealer has sold out—or he looks for it at some stand that doesn't keep it. Then, for a few months, he drops out. Meanwhile, the dealer of whom he has inquired for it has ordered some extra copies, or begun to stock it. The result is easily seen. There are 60,000 news-stands in the United States. Some of them, of course,

carry only the cheap magazines, but perhaps 20,000 of them have a sufficiently civilized clientele to stock such publications as *THE SMART SET*. To cover all of them on this hit-or-miss plan subjects us to inevitable heavy losses—for we must take back copies that are unsold. In consequence, our printing and paper costs are a good deal larger than they ought to be, and we have that much less to spend upon the contents of the magazine.

The conversion of a substantial part of our news-stand circulation into subscriptions would lead us into easier waters, and enable us to improve the magazine. Not only would our readers get a better magazine, but they would get it regularly and surely, with no need to look for it at the corner stand, and no chance of not finding it. Finally, they would save something every year—not much, but something. I thus make the suggestion that you who read this send in your subscription on the blank herewith. I assume that you already know the magazine—that you have read at least a few numbers, and found them not altogether stupid. If you like my own writings you will find them regularly in *THE SMART SET*—and seldom anywhere else.

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